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## **Looking Backward into the Future:<sup>1</sup> Thoughts on the Study of the Past, Ritual, and Women's Eucharistic Experiences in Byzantium**

Maria Evangelatou

### **Studying the Past**

As a student of Christian visual production of the so-called medieval period (specializing in Byzantine culture), I have often marveled at the theological richness of seemingly simple narratives that could communicate a wealth of possible meanings in the eyes of their intended original audiences. The mundane act of Mary drawing water from a well or spinning purple thread at the time of her Annunciation (whether in verbal or visual forms of storytelling) could resonate with deep theological significance in the minds of cultural insiders who were familiar with the basic religious beliefs, symbols, scriptural sources, rituals, and other cultural practices of their tradition. Believing they lived in a universe created by their God and ruled by his laws and providence, Christians of the past were taught to seek deeper meaning and guidance in aspects of the material world, their daily experiences, and their communal history, as all these manifestations could reveal divine wisdom and God's plan for human salvation.<sup>2</sup> In this context, familiar and simple objects like water or thread could make complex theological concepts more relatable and understandable to the faithful. For example, the idea that the Incarnation of God in Christ ushered in a new creation of the world (which was initially born out of water in Genesis 1–2) was one of the possible meanings evoked in the tradition that Mary was drawing water from a well when Gabriel first approached her during her Annunciation. Likewise, the many theological subtleties

of the Incarnation as a union between humanity and divinity could be accommodated in the metaphor of textile production and use, referenced in the tradition according to which Mary was spinning purple thread for the Temple veil when Gabriel revealed to her the will of God during her Annunciation.<sup>3</sup>

Multidimensional symbolism was vibrantly alive in the experiences of medieval Christians of the Orthodox and Catholic denominations and is still active in Catholic and Orthodox practices and worldviews today, even though historical and cultural developments of recent centuries (including capitalism/consumerism and scientism) have worked against the richness of humanity's symbolic and spiritual connection with the world. As Caroline Walker Bynum has observed, "Medieval symbols were far more complex—polysemic as anthropologists say—than modern people are aware . . . we might find in medieval art and literature some suggestion of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack."<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons I became a Byzantinist is because I find it enriching to explore the symbolic wealth of that culture and try to honor the perspectives and belief system of a tradition that still influences my world today but at the same time is long gone and very different from what I can experience. I was raised in Greece in a family with a mix of mostly atheist or agnostic members who visited church on great feast days of the Orthodox tradition primarily for cultural rather than religious reasons. As a child raised in such a family, I was not taught to appreciate the symbolic richness of Orthodox ritual (rooted in the Byzantine past). So, on our monthly school visits to a local church I would claim that incense made me dizzy, and I was given permission to pass the time chatting with a friend in the church yard. Yet that rich scent became one of the sensations I enjoy (and have studied) as an adult.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes I wonder how my scholarship might have been affected if I had been raised as a Christian Orthodox believer. What insights would I have gained if I had experienced the rituals of the Greek Orthodox Church as a practitioner of the faith rather than an observer? Would I have noticed different things or asked different questions? Would I have felt a different connection to the Byzantine past of the modern Greek world? Even in that case, as a Byzantinist I would have still studied a culture very different from my own, trying to understand the experiences of people of another era, whose traces are only partial and fragmented at best. It is exactly this loss that in my eyes makes the study of the past such a fascinating and worthwhile endeavor.

To recover something of the lives of people long gone is to recover something about our shared human potential, vulnerability, and responsibility. To study a culture of the past with respect for its idiosyncrasies is a practice that teaches us to acknowledge diversity and be inclusive in the present. The challenge for me is how

to understand a foreign world of times bygone, a world that survives in fragmented traces or refracted reverberations, in ways that do not introduce too much of “me” in “it.” Clearly, when “me” and “it” meet, there will be an exchange, an interaction that changes “me” as much as it changes *what I learn of and from* “it.” Perhaps, then, it is essential to remind myself that despite my best efforts, I will never know that culture of the past as its own people experienced it, each one in their own individual ways. I can only hypothesize and perceive what I am inclined to see, in a convergence of “me” and fragments of “it” that my own sensibilities lead me to select. Not unlike ritual, this convergence can transform me through what I experience in my efforts to comprehend a reality beyond my grasp. Like the divine to which Christians reach out during rituals, the past itself probably remains unaffected by my attempts to decipher it. It is my present and my future (my ideas about the past of humanity and what I do with them) that may change through my explorations. Whose past am I studying and for what purpose? What am I trying to find there and what am I likely to discover as a consequence?

I have heard it said that according to archaeologists, the past always changes (because the ways we study it evolve, our perspectives shift, or new evidence comes to light), and only the future remains unchanged (because it has not happened yet). On the other hand, scholars of futures studies may claim that past, present, and future always change and that the past may contain multiple potentialities that could have led to different presents and futures. I appreciate the intention to explore alternative pasts in order to counter the notion that our present(s) and future(s) are predetermined. I am also in agreement that the past is as diverse as the people who experienced it when it was their present.<sup>6</sup> Still, I have grown uncomfortable with the statement “the past always changes” because, if taken literally, it might imply that our own contemporary perspectives can somehow affect the past itself rather than what we learn of it, find in it, or make of it. There might be a dangerous arrogance lurking in the notion that our views can alter the very essence of what we study. I prefer the humility of recognizing that different perspectives lead to different perceptions. So I would amend the above somehow rhetorical and sensationalist statement “the past always changes” to the more humble and prosaic “*our perceptions of the past* always change.” And of course, such shifting perceptions can also influence and change our future.

In a world in crisis, at war with itself, at the brink of ecological and social collapse, what is the point of studying the past? Maybe one reason we are at the brink is the arrogance of believing that the past cannot teach us anything and what counts is only our present and instant gratification. Statements about the *presence of the past* might sound cliché, but in societies that suffer from consumerist-induced amnesia and identity crisis, perhaps they are worth repeating: the past lives in us

and is active in all levels of communal and individual experiences, from our social structures and cultural practices to our DNA and epigenetic memory.<sup>7</sup> Our stories and our histories have been unfolding for millennia, and they make us who we are today. What we have created, suffered, or inflicted as communities, families, and individuals through time brings us to where we are now.<sup>8</sup> If we are to move forward toward a more equitable society, we have to look back and seek inspiration in creativity, honor resilience in the face of suffering, and support healing through acknowledgment and redress of wrongdoings.<sup>9</sup> Exploring the human condition through the study of the past can nurture all these endeavors. In moments of crisis, turmoil, and collapse, creativity in particular can be a brave path toward resilience and healing.<sup>10</sup> I choose to study the creativity of the past in honor of the human potential it manifests. And in my efforts to imagine female experiences and contributions in a past that marginalized women, I try to recognize both trauma and resilience, and shed more light on wrongdoings that still call for healing.

Sometimes, the only thing I can do is open up space for questions that are worth considering because they can help us empathize with the human condition (even if we may never get clear answers to the questions themselves). What did it mean, for example, for Byzantine women to see Mary honored as the provider of the Eucharist—the one who delivered to the world the salvific body of her son, to be sacrificed on the cross and on the altar of Christian churches? What did her Eucharistic role mean to female believers, especially since they themselves were excluded from the priesthood and only male clerics could offer the Eucharist to the faithful, under the presiding presence of Mary in the apse of Byzantine churches (Figs. 1–3)?<sup>11</sup> It is unavoidable to wonder how the women of that time felt about and processed the paradox of female exclusion from the leadership of a church institution symbolized by Mary herself.<sup>12</sup> And since so little survives of female voices on this or other matters, the best we can often do is contemplate possible scenarios that could have unfolded in specific contexts (and never lose sight of their hypothetical nature).<sup>13</sup>

### **The Ritual of the Eucharist and Byzantine Women**

Rituals have the power to transform those who partake in them, but the outcome of that transformation depends greatly on the partakers themselves, their inclinations and needs, their experiences and struggles. By connecting the past with the present and future of a community, rituals speak about the identity and potential of their partakers in the world.<sup>14</sup> So how could the ritual of the Eucharist have spoken to Byzantine women about themselves? Below I briefly explore some

possible scenarios that also touch on the more general issue of potential human experiences through ritual.

First, I would like to acknowledge that the spatiotemporal realm or ritual can be one in which the mundane and the ordinary may be replaced with the transcendental and the extraordinary. Ritual spaces like Byzantine churches were meant to immerse believers into an earthly reflection of heavenly Jerusalem to come (and through their decoration and other sensorial aspects, such as light, incense, and the sound of hymnography, at least the most elaborate ecclesiastical ambiances could be very effective at foreshadowing the kingdom of God in the experience of the faithful).<sup>15</sup> In such spaces, the pace of ordinary life could be replaced with a sense of timefulness and peacefulness, in which the past and the future of salvation history were condensed in the present moment of communion with God (for whom all things are in the present, as Gregory of Nyssa aptly declared).<sup>16</sup> In the mystical symbolism of the Eucharist in particular, the whole trajectory of humanity's path, from past fall to future redemption, was evoked and linked with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, reenacted on the altar of the church. The fateful Tree of Knowledge was replaced with the salvific Tree of Life (the cross or Jesus himself), and the loss caused by the forbidden fruit was reversed through the grace of the body of Christ (the fruit of the Tree of Life). According to Christian belief, through his Incarnation and sacrifice Christ opened the path for the future return of the faithful to the kingdom of God, where a divine banquet will welcome them and mark the full circle of their trajectory, from the bitter taste of disobedience and exile to the sweet taste of homecoming and salvation.<sup>17</sup> Partakers of the Eucharist could focus on this promise of salvation and experience the ritual as humans seeking union with God and transcending their mundane identities and cares, including the predicaments of gender.

Yet women in particular might have found it harder to forget those predicaments, since in the patriarchal culture of Byzantium they were constantly reminded of their presumed inferiority or even deviousness, and were primarily cast as daughters of Eve rather than sisters of Mary.<sup>18</sup> I wonder what potential thoughts might have crossed the mind of women as they were waiting to consume the Eucharist from the hands of male priests and deacons while gazing at the image of the Mother of God looking at them from the apse of Byzantine churches. Especially from the ninth century onward, Mary standing on her own with hands raised in prayer or enthroned with her child on her lap was the primary focal point of the gaze of believers, at least in churches large enough to have a tall apse visible behind the templon screen (Figs. 1–3).<sup>19</sup> Mary's size and her central position in the apse made her the most obvious receptacle for the sight and the prayers of



*Figure 1 Enthroned Mary holding Christ, Byzantine apse mosaic, St. Sophia, Thessaloniki, Greece, church of the eighth century, mosaic of the eleventh century, (templon screen of later date).*

believers during the Eucharist. It was not Christ Pantokrator on the dome above but his human mother in the apse below who welcomed the faithful.<sup>20</sup> How many of them would have thought in that moment that the Theotokos (God-Birther) was the highest paragon of Christian conduct and experience—the one all believers should aspire to imitate—and she was even the ultimate model of Eucharistic union with Christ? She had literally embodied Christ, housing him in her womb and weaving his body with her blood. After offering him to the world, she had served him with motherly devotion throughout her life, sharing his sufferings and following in his footsteps like no other. Her flesh had become his flesh in absolute union, and she had also shared his calling, becoming the very first Christian and the greatest imitator of Christ in her goodness and self-sacrifice. Partakers of the Eucharist were now standing in front of her, hoping to also experience union with Christ by ingesting (rather than gestating) his body. Perhaps a way to understand that mystical union in relatable emotional, spiritual, cultural, and social terms was to look at Christ's mother and her union with her son. Even though Christians were urged to become imitators of Christ and live a life in Christ, perhaps many of them (and particularly women) might have found special affinity with the idea of becoming imitators of Mary in her relation with Christ: as the



*Figure 2 Enthroned Mary holding a medallion with Christ, above the Communion of the apostles and standing hierarchs, Byzantine apse wall-paintings in the church of St. Sophia, Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia, eleventh century (icons on the templon screen are of later date).*

supreme model of Christian virtue, she was fully human (like they were), she was the servant of Jesus and his people (like they were urged to be), and she was the pure Bride of Christ (as their souls should be).<sup>21</sup>

So during the Eucharist, Mary in the apse was both the provider of the Eucharistic body of Christ and the supreme model for those wishing to partake of it. She fully embodied the church as the one who housed Christ inside her, as the mother of his children, and as the first among those children.<sup>22</sup> Yet the Eucharistic ritual was fully controlled by male clerics, and women were not allowed to enter the sanctuary. In addition, the more Mary was becoming prominent and powerful in Byzantine culture, the more the male-dominated institution of the church took steps to distance women from her, emphasizing how exceptional and unlike other





*Figure 3 Mary standing in prayer above the Communion of the apostles, Byzantine apse mosaics in the church of St. Sophia, Kiev, Ukraine, eleventh century (templon screen of later date). The mosaics were created by an artist invited from Constantinople and reflect Byzantine church decoration.*

members of her sex she was.<sup>23</sup> During the Eucharistic banquet, what could her prominence have meant for women who saw male priests emerge in front of the womblike apse of the sanctuary to offer the sacrificed and salvific body of Mary's son under her gaze?

While we can only hypothesize about possible answers to this question, it is still worthwhile to explore this line of inquiry, even if only to create more space in our intellectual and emotional worlds for those who were systematically oppressed in their societies. In my experience, this kind of exercise allows me to follow a thread of empathic imaginings that may also help me cultivate more empathy in the ways I relate with my own world today. It also allows me to trace potential female responses that help me acknowledge not only the oppression and frustration of women in a patriarchal society but also their resilience and creativity. I may be able to recognize the possible paths they could have taken in order to

navigate the sexist challenges of their culture, make significant contributions, and cultivate their agency and empowerment. I feel that in order to properly honor women, I have to be equally mindful of their suffering *and* their ability to surpass it.

In closing this thought-piece, I would like to invite the reader to consider the potential of Byzantine women to find solace and even self-worth in the context of the Eucharistic ritual by relating to the powerful figure of Mary. Clearly, individual female responses could vary greatly, depending on the identity, backgrounds, and contexts of different women. After all, one reason that ritual can be so meaningful to participants is its ability to create a space for *personal* response and transformation within its multisensorial and multidimensional framework. Mary was endorsed by the patriarchal establishment of Byzantium as an exceptional woman beyond paragon who could advance feelings of inadequacy among other women and remind them of duties and values that reinforced their domesticity and marginalization (since she embodied virtues like obedience and industriousness).<sup>24</sup> However, to conclude this piece I focus on the potential of empowering associations that at least some women could have developed through their relation with the Theotokos, cultivating feelings of pride and self-worth through traditional roles they were expected to fulfill, as she had done.

In broad strokes, I choose to imagine the following potential female experiences in church spaces that were dominated by the arresting image of Mary in the apse (and I myself find solace in such responses). I hope that at least some female believers could have felt a sense of safety and acceptance when they were welcomed by Mary inside the embrace of their local church. And if they continued to contemplate her role while the Eucharistic ritual celebrated her son's birth and sacrifice, women could perhaps have thought of her in female terms that were prominent both in their own experiences and in the ways Mary was hailed in Byzantine culture. She was the woman who *wove* together divinity and humanity in the body of Christ, and saw that body *torn* asunder on the Cross for the healing of humankind. She was the mother who *birthed* salvation and *fed* the world with heavenly bread (the same one offered at the Eucharistic ritual). Wasn't she like those who devoted their lives to weaving for and feeding their families? Weren't they like her, giving birth to sons who died defending their community, and daughters who sacrificed their lives in childbirth and an existence of service, like their mothers?<sup>25</sup>

The Theotokos was ubiquitous in Byzantine culture and was celebrated in terms that could allow women to relate to her in dignifying ways (even though that was not the only option).<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the context of the Eucharist was a particularly fertile ground for at least some women to make such empowering connections

with the Mother of God, as from her place in the apse she presided supreme, the first to offer Christ's body to the world, above and before any male priests took on that role and excluded women from it.<sup>27</sup> In their daily lives, women still performed Marian roles. Perhaps during the Eucharistic celebration of God's Incarnation in Jesus and the feeding of the faithful with the fruit of life, at least some Byzantine women could have found solace and pride in the following thought: without Mary there would have been no Christ, and without Eve and her fruit of knowledge there would have been no Mary.<sup>28</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first part of this title is inspired by the concept of *tā-vā* that emerges in various iterations in Polynesian cultures and emphasizes the importance of the past (e.g., in terms of cultural traditions, ancestral links, and communal histories) in the present and the future. According to this concept, "People are thought to walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future, both taking place in the present, where the past and future are constantly mediated in the ever-transforming present. The past has stood the test of time and space, and it must therefore be placed in front of people as a guidance in the present, and because the future has yet to happen, it must be placed to the back of or behind people in the present, where both past and future are symmetrically negotiated in the process" (Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina "Tā, Vā, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity," *Pacific Studies* 3.3 [2010]: 170). I thank Stacy Kamehiro, professor in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for introducing me to this concept and sharing this article with me. Another work that explores the dynamic role of the past in Native Hawaiian theory

and practice is *The Past before Us: Mo'okū'auhau as Methodology*, edited by Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2019).

<sup>2</sup> This understanding of the material world as a manifestation of divine presence, wisdom, and will falls under what scholars call “natural theology” and is central both in the Bible and in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and later theologians. See Christopher Rowland, “Natural Theology and the Christian Bible,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, edited by Russell Re Manning, John Hedley Brooke, and Fraser Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23–37, esp. 23–30, 32–33, 36. In the same volume, see Wayne Hankey, “Natural Theology in the Patristic Period,” 38–56; Alexander W. Hall, “Natural Theology in the Middle Ages,” 57–74; and Christopher C. Knight, “Natural Theology and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,” 213–26. I thank Stacy Kamehiro for drawing my attention to scholarly literature on natural theology. For a typological understanding of history, which identifies the divine plan for human salvation in events that echo one another in a pattern of prefiguration and fulfillment across time (and encompass the history of Christian communities), see, e.g., Jean Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1960). See also Elizabeth Jeffreys, “Old Testament ‘History’ and the Byzantine Chronicle,” in *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, edited by Paul Magdalino and Robert S. Nelson (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 153–74. In the same volume, see Claudia Rapp, “Old Testament Models for Emperors in Early Byzantium,” 175–98.

<sup>3</sup> For the Annunciation and textile symbolism, see Nicholas P. Conostas, “Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995): 164–94, and more extensive treatment of the same subject in Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 315–58. See also Maria Evangelatou, “The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation,” in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium: Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, edited by Antony Eastmond and Liz James (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 261–79; and Evangelatou, “Threads of Power: Clothing Symbolism, Human Salvation, and Female Identity in the Illustrated Homilies by Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 69 (2014): 241–324, esp. 266–86. For a discussion of the Annunciation in connection to both textile and water symbolism, see Father Maximos Conostas, *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography* (Alhambra, CA: St. Sebastian Orthodox Press,

2014), 108–57. See also Evangelatou, “The Theology of Everyday Life: Symbolic Materialities in the Protevangelion of James (2nd c.) and in the Byzantine Kokkinnobaphos Homilies on the Life of Mary (12th c.),” to appear in the proceedings of “Material of Christian Apocrypha,” a 2018 conference at the University of Virginia.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Evangelatou, “The Symbolism of the Censer in Byzantine Representations of the Dormition of the Virgin,” *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, edited by Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 117–25.

<sup>6</sup> For a rich discussion of some of the above topics with references to relevant literature, see Roy Bendor, Elina Eriksson, and Daniel Pargman, “Looking Backward to the Future: On Past-Facing Approaches to Futuring,” *Futures* 125 (2021): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102666>.

<sup>7</sup> Sociocultural manifestations reflect the histories of communities, while our individual DNA and the ways our genes express themselves in different environmental and behavior conditions (epigenetic changes) reflect the histories of our families. For example, scientists are beginning to understand how epigenetic memory relates to intergenerational trauma; see Rachel Yehuda, “Trauma in the Family Tree,” *Scientific American*, July 2022, 5055, available online (retitled) at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-parents-rsquo-trauma-leaves-biological-traces-in-children/>.

<sup>8</sup> For a perceptible discussion of the millennial roots of current human identities, centered on the example of one particular community that has suffered through colonialism but has a much more complex and layered identity that goes far beyond and far deeper than the colonial experience, see, e.g., Ken Parmasad, “Searching for Continuity: The Ancestral Impulse and Community Identity Formation in Trinidad,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1994): 22–29.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Emalani Case, *Everything Ancient Was Once New: Indigenous Persistence from Hawai'i to Kabiki* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021). I thank Stacy Kamehiro for recommending this title. For the importance of acknowledging wrongdoings as a first step toward healing, see, e.g., Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). In her introduction (pp. 2–3) the author emphasizes how denial of violence inhibits healing both for the survivors and for the perpetrators.

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, I find the following statement particularly moving: “Is poetry impossible after Auschwitz? I plead for more poetry, more creativity, more freedom.” These are the closing remarks of Rithy Panh (Cambodian filmmaker, writer, producer, and survivor of the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge) in his essay on his film *Irradiated* (2020), available at [https://www.adk.de/de/projekte/2020/heartfield/PDFs/HFD-Symposium-Pahn-E\\_20\\_08\\_05.pdf?m=1654167559&](https://www.adk.de/de/projekte/2020/heartfield/PDFs/HFD-Symposium-Pahn-E_20_08_05.pdf?m=1654167559&). I thank Boreth Ly, a professor in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department of UCSC, for drawing my attention to the work of this artist.

<sup>11</sup> For Mary’s Eucharistic role in Byzantine culture, see Maria Evangelatou, “Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The Theotokos as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture,” in *The Reception of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, edited by Thomas Arentzen and Mary B. Cunningham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 77–119. I have started exploring female experiences of Mary’s Eucharistic role in “Female Materialities at the Altar: Mary’s Priestly Motherhood and Women’s Eucharistic Experience in Late Antique and Byzantine Churches,” in *Material Culture and Women’s Religious Experience in Antiquity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, edited by Mark D. Ellison, Catherine Gines Taylor, and Carolyn Osiek (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2021), 257–301.

<sup>12</sup> For Mary as the Church and Bride of Christ, see the literature mentioned in Evangelatou, “Krater of Nectar,” 95n91.

<sup>13</sup> In “Female Materialities at the Altar” (272–84), I attempt to consider some possible female experiences in the specific visual context of the sixth-century Euphrasian basilica in Poreč, modern Croatia.

<sup>14</sup> For an exploration of the temporal references of ritual, sacred spaces, and relevant visual production in medieval Christianity, see Maria Evangelatou, “Hierochronotopy: Stepping into Timeful Space through Bonanno’s Twelfth-Century Door for the Pisa Cathedral,” in *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*, edited by Jelena Bogdanović (London: Routledge, 2021), 134–72.

<sup>15</sup> The bibliography on Christian concepts of Jerusalem, New Jerusalem, and Heavenly Jerusalem (including the idea of Christian churches as Heavenly Jerusalem) is rather extensive. Here I mention just a couple of significant publications with references to further literature: Alexei Lidov, ed., *New Jerusalems: Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Spaces* (Moscow: Indrik, 2009); and Bianca Kühnel, Galit Noga-Banai, and Hanna Vorholt, eds., *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> “For God there is neither past nor future but all things are in the present” (“Gregory of Nyssa, Εἰς τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν τῶν ψαλμῶν, δεύτερον βιβλίον,” PG 44, 489CD, 569BC, translated by R. E. Heine, in *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995], 126, 184). Timefulness has been introduced to the literature of visual studies by Diana Rose, a PhD graduate from the Visual Studies program at UCSC. In her dissertation, “Living Time, Performing Memory: Maya Ceremonies of Foundation and Renewal,” Rose examines “how Maya notions of cyclical time were practiced, looking specifically at how the past, present, and future coexisted in particular moments” (<http://harc-dev.ucsc.edu/people/students/diana-rose>). This coexistence of past, present, and future that transcends a linear perception of time also reflects the timefulness (rather than timelessness) of the Christian God as eternal and is echoed in the timefulness of Christian rituals in which God is present among his people.

<sup>17</sup> For the Eucharist as a prefiguration of the heavenly banquet, see Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 139–61.

<sup>18</sup> On the cultural construct of femininity as inherently inferior to masculinity and the cultural imperative of female subordination in the Christian world of Late Antiquity (that also defined gender constructs in later Byzantine periods), see Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), esp. 119–41. See also Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Woman and Empire in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), esp. 2, 12–31, 115–28, 133–40, 144. For the antithesis between Eve and Mary, see Evangelatou, “Krater of Nectar,” 89n66.

<sup>19</sup> For the prominent presence of Mary in Byzantine apse decoration from the ninth century onward, see A. Mantas, *Τὸ εἰκονογραφικὸ πρόγραμμα τοῦ ἱεροῦ βήματος τῶν μεσοβυζαντινῶν ναῶν τῆς Ἑλλάδας (843–1204)* (Athens: University of Athens Press, 2001), 57–83.

<sup>20</sup> I argue this both because of the sight line that in many church interiors could have connected viewers more effortlessly with Mary in the apse ahead rather than with Christ in the dome above, and because as a human mother, she might have felt more approachable and relatable than her divine son and universal judge (which is why she also functioned as the most powerful mediator between the faithful and Christ). The visibility of the Pantokrator in the dome can vary greatly depending on the exact design and dimensions of the building. For example, in some cases the dome might be both tall and narrow in diameter, so that to see the

Pantokrator, viewers have to stand roughly below him and crane their heads up (lifting one's gaze might not be enough).

<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Mathews, "The Transformation Symbolism in Byzantine Architecture and the Meaning of the Pantokrator in the Dome," in *Church and People in Byzantium*, edited by Rosemary Morris (Birmingham, UK: Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, University of Birmingham, 1990), 191–214, discusses the idea of a life in Christ and union with Christ during the Eucharist and proposes that the image of the Pantokrator in the dome of Byzantine churches is a "Christian mandala" that visualizes the concept of the perfect Christian self. I propose that, due to Mary's identity and her prominent position in the apse, she (rather than the Pantokrator) might have been more readily understood as a relatable model of transformation and human perfection, encapsulating Christian union with the divine. This might be an instance of divergence from what male-authored texts advocated regarding direct union with Christ, and what at least some of the faithful (and perhaps women in particular?) might have experienced in the visual and ritual context of Byzantine churches.

<sup>22</sup> For the idea of Mary as the Church / Bride of Christ, see the literature mentioned in Evangelatou, "Krater of Nectar," 95n91.

<sup>23</sup> For the exclusion of women from priesthood and the increasing limitations imposed on them as Mary's prominence was growing in Byzantine culture, see Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 295–98, and "Female Materialities at the Altar," 264–70, with references to further literature.

<sup>24</sup> See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 294–325.

<sup>25</sup> For the domestic duties of Byzantine women, see Alicia Walker, "Home: A Space Rich in Blessings," in *Byzantine Women and Their World*, edited by Ioli Kalavrezou (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 161–66, esp. 162: "As Chrysostom notes, the woman's role centered on processing the raw materials provided by men: food was turned to meals, wool into thread and cloth, children into virtuous and productive adults." See also Phaidon Koukoules, *Byzantinon Bios kai Politismos*, vol. 2.2 of 6 vols. (Athens: Ekdoseis Papazese, 1952), 201–4. Specifically on spinning and weaving as quintessential female activities, see the literature mentioned in Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 286n121; and Catherine Gines Taylor, *Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning: Allotting the Scarlet and the Purple* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). For Mary in the context of Byzantine war, see Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006), 37–103. On p. 61 Pentcheva notes the two attributes that make Mary prominent in the context of war: virginal



motherhood symbolic of invincibility and motherly sacrifice, which involves deep suffering. Byzantine women could embody only the latter.

<sup>26</sup> For Mary's prominence in Byzantine culture, see, e.g., Vassilaki, *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Milan: Skira, 2000); Vassilaki, *Images of the Mother of God*; Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*; and Artentzen and Cunningham, *Reception of the Mother of God in Byzantium*.

<sup>27</sup> A poignant contemporary female contemplation on this topic is offered by Frances Croake Frank in her poem *Did the Woman Say?*:

*Did the woman say,  
When she held him for the first time in the dark of a stable,  
After the pain and the bleeding and the crying,  
"This is my body, this is my blood"?*  
*Did the woman say,  
When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,  
After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,  
"This is my body, this is my blood"?*  
*Well that she said it to him then,  
For dry old men,  
brocaded robes belying barrenness  
Ordain that she not say it for him now.*

I thank Katie Ligmond, PhD candidate in the Visual Studies program at UCSC, for sharing this poem with me (retrieved September 29, 2022, from <https://womenpriests.org/mary-priest/beattie-mary-the-virgin-priest/>).

<sup>28</sup> The potential of positive female approaches to Eve is masterfully explored by Mark D. Ellison, "Reimagining and Reimaging Eve in Early Christianity," in Ellison, Taylor, and Osiek, *Material Culture and Women's Religious Experience in Antiquity*, 213–56. The limited surviving work of two female Byzantine hymnographers of the ninth century, Kassia and Thekla, clearly indicates how women could see Mary as an empowering figure that honors female nature at large (see Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 295, with references to further literature). In the Catholic tradition, the theological concept of *felix culpa* (happy fault), that is, Eve's sin as a prerequisite for the grace of the Incarnation and Mary's role in it, is explored by B. Williamson, "The Virgin Lactans as Second Eve: Image of the Salvatrix," *Studies in Iconography* 19 (1998): 105–38 (however, contrary to the author's claims, the *visual material* explored in this article primarily casts Eve in a negative light, along the commonplace condemnation of the first woman in mainstream Christian discourse).